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Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Re-assessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Politics

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ABSTRACT Since the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the Turkish government's foreign and increasingly domestic politics have been characterized as 'neo-Ottoman,' a concept which both its critics and champions have wielded in different ways. The article revisits and reassesses articulations of neo-Ottomanism in Turkish foreign policy, and explores the significance of its appearance in Turkey's domestic politics in Turkey. In doing so, it offers an explanation that draws out the distinct and varied interpretations of neo-Ottomanism present in such debates. It argues that neo-Ottomanism as used within a foreign policy milieu is not without its analytical use but is contestable due to its wide range of interpretations. Following this, the article analyzes the more recent appearance of the concept of neo-Ottomanism in Turkish domestic politics, highlighting its confluence with the increasing authoritarianism of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as a newly empowered president. It highlights how the AKP has embraced and appropriated a precisely delineated neo-Ottomanism as a rhetorical and legitimating framework for its domestic policies. In doing so, the article demonstrates how neo-Ottomanism as developed and understood in the foreign policy arena initially, has been adopted in domestic politics under the AKP.

KEY WORDS: *Neo-Ottomanism; Turkish domestic politics; Turkish foreign policy; Turkey*

For at least the past decade, neo-Ottomanism has served as one of the main conceptual tools for understanding Turkish foreign policy. More recently, the concept also has emerged in Turkish domestic political discourses, albeit in a distinct manner from, yet relevant to, its foreign policy equivalent. Nevertheless, despite its long-standing presence in discourses and analyses of Turkish foreign policy, and its more recent, but increasingly frequent appearances in Turkish domestic politics, neo-Ottomanism has remained a contested concept. When referencing Turkish foreign policy, its usage is applied in myriad different ways, but in domestic politics, it thus far has remained under-examined.

The main aim of this article is to explore how neo-Ottomanism, as initially developed and applied in the foreign policy arena, has been adopted in domestic politics. In

doing so, my objective is to make a threefold contribution to existing interpretations of, and literature on, neo-Ottomanism. First, I offer an overview of how neo-Ottomanism has been used in analyses of Turkish foreign policy. The concept's omnipresence in foreign policy discourses and analyses has resulted in a range of applications; indeed, it might be its very nebulousness that has contributed to its discursive and analytical popularity. The explanations in the article offer one way of understanding the different interpretations and applications of neo-Ottomanism in discourses and analyses of Turkish foreign policy. My second contribution is a critical assessment of neo-Ottomanism for understanding contemporary Turkish foreign policy. The conceptual contestability of neo-Ottomanism also is supplemented by scholars' varied interpretations of how this constitutes soft power projection by Turkey.

In the third section of this article, I examine the appearance of neo-Ottomanism in Turkish domestic politics under the AKP. I explore the significance of its appearance, and how it has been adopted in the domestic sphere. While in foreign policy the Turkish government has been wary of the neo-Ottoman label, while at the same time still embracing its Ottoman heritage, it has been more consistent, and indeed has embraced and appropriated a more precisely delineated neo-Ottomanism as a rhetorical and legitimating framework for its domestic policies. Thus, neo-Ottomanism has acquired a distinct meaning in domestic politics, and has materialized in a host of recent government policies. This is ever more prescient following the AKP's response to the failed coup attempt of 2016, and the constitutional amendments enacted by President Erdoğan in 2017.

Before moving on to the main arguments of the paper, a brief epistemological and methodological note might be in order. First, the bifurcated analysis offered in this article is not meant to indicate that foreign and domestic politics are sealed off from one another, nor that the distinction between international and domestic politics is clear and unproblematic. The bifurcation serves only heuristic purposes, providing a clear framework for exploring the discursive iterations of neo-Ottomanism. Second, in reference to Turkey's foreign policy, the concept of neo-Ottomanism has been articulated by both the Turkish government (in self-representations of its role and position in the international sphere), and in analyses of Turkish foreign policy by other international actors, as well as within academic literature. Articulations of neo-Ottomanism as practiced by the AKP in domestic politics thus far have remained under-analyzed, although authors have discussed antecedents under the party's *Refah* party predecessor within the context of its use as a counter to Kemalism.¹ It is for this reason that it is possible to explore the foreign policy articulations of neo-Ottomanism through critical engagement with the foreign policy literature on neo-Ottomanism. As there is as yet little academic engagement with more recent domestic articulations of neo-Ottomanism, my research relies largely on analyses of statements and images in circulation in popular media.

¹ See further: Esra Özyürek (2004) Miniaturizing Atatürk: Privatization of State Imagery and Ideology in Turkey, *American Ethnologist*, 31(3) pp. 374–391; E. Özyürek (2006) *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press); Alev Çınar (2006) *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey: Bodies, Places, and Time* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press); and Yael Navarro-Yashin (2002) *Faces of the State: Secularism And Public Life In Turkey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

What is Neo-Ottomanism?

For at least the last decade, the concept of neo-Ottomanism has been omnipresent in both academic and wider analyses of Turkish foreign policy.² Although some analyses of neo-Ottomanism have pointed out that references to neo-Ottoman foreign policy ambitions have preceded the coming to power of the AK Party (AKP) government in 2003,³ ‘neo-Ottoman foreign policy’ now most commonly has been associated with the AKP government of Prime Minister (later, President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Minister of Foreign Affairs (later, Prime Minister) Ahmet Davutoğlu. Generally framed as either pragmatic or neo-Ottoman in character, the AKP’s foreign policy has attracted considerable attention.⁴

My analyses of the foreign policy literature, as well as broader, non-academic media and policy discourses referencing ‘neo-Ottoman foreign policy,’ reveal the presence of a variety of distinct yet not necessarily mutually exclusive interpretations of neo-Ottomanism, many of which retain a degree of vagueness and ambiguity that calls for a detailed analysis of these distinct interpretations and the manner in which they are mobilized. As Nicholas Danforth aptly points out,⁵ what neo-Ottomanism stands for depends on how one imagines the Ottoman Empire, with a variety of ‘Ottoman Empires’ coexisting in the Turkish and, one should add, international imagination.

Broadly speaking, three distinct images of the Ottoman Empire underpin analyses and self-representations of Turkish foreign and domestic policy under the AKP government: (1) the image of the Ottoman Empire as the cradle or apex of civilization; (2) the image of the Ottoman Empire as an Islamic Empire; and (3) the image of the Ottoman Empire as a liberal, multicultural empire. In line with the image of the Ottoman Empire as the ‘cradle’ or ‘apex’ of civilization, Turkey, as heir to the Empire, is positioned as the guardian and proprietor of its cultural legacy, a legacy it is responsible for cultivating within the region, and sharing with the world. Representative of this discourse are then Prime Minister Erdoğan’s statements on Turkish culture:

For thousands of years, we have been the carriers of a unique civilization, history and heritage in which we have molded and collated different cultures, different civilizations, along with our own culture;

² See further: Ömer Taşpınar (2008) Turkey’s Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism, *Carnegie Papers*, 10, pp. 1–28; Ayhan Kaya (2013) Yunus Emre Cultural Centers: The AKP’s Neo-Ottomanism and Islamism, *Perspectives*, 5, pp. 56–60; Nicholas Danforth (2014) Multi-Purpose Empire: Ottoman History in Republican Turkey, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 50(4), pp. 655–678; Cınar Kiper (2013) Sultan Erdoğan: Turkey’s Rebranding Into the New, Old Ottoman Empire, *The Atlantic*, April 5, 2013. Available at: <http://theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/sultan-edrogran-turkeys-rebranding-into-the-new-old-ottoman-empire/274724/>; Bilgehan Öztürk (2013) Turkey’s New Foreign Policy: A Manifestation of Neo-Ottomanism?, *EuroAsia News: Analysis*, September 27, 2013. Available at: <http://www.euroasianews.com/analysis-turkeys-new-foreign-policy-a-manifestation-of-neo-ottomanism/>; and Kubilay Arin (2014) The New Turkey: A Rival to the West in the Near East, *E-International Relations*, June 5, 2014. Available at: <http://www.e-ir.info/2014/06/05/the-new-turkey-a-rival-to-the-west-in-the-near-east/>, accessed January 16, 2018.

³ See further Öztürk, Turkey’s New Foreign Policy.

⁴ See, for example, N. Danforth (2008) Ideology and Pragmatism in Turkish Foreign Policy: From Atatürk to the AKP, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 7(3), pp. 83–95.

⁵ N. Danforth (2014) The Empire Strikes Back, *Foreign Policy*, March 27, 2014. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/27/the-empire-strikes-back-2/>, accessed January 20, 2018.

and on language:

Turkish is not only the communicative language of the people living in these lands. Turkish is also a language of science and at the same time a language of arts and a language of literature.⁶

Then Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu made similar statements on the occasion of the inauguration of the Yunus Emre Foundation in 2007. The foundation is responsible for the Yunus Emre Cultural Centers that have opened in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and North America and is itself a good example of the materialization of this discursive strand of neo-Ottomanism. According to Davutoğlu, the foundation:

...has two important standing goals. First [is] to enable the meeting of our national culture and universal culture, and [second] to increase its influence in universal culture. [As] very few nations that have directly encountered different cultures and civilizations have become the subject of those civilizations, [but rather] sometimes generated cultural blends from these civilizations, sometimes participated in intense and active communication as our nation has. [It is incumbent on Turkey to] lead the way to a new Enlightenment in the Balkans.⁷

On the inauguration of a Yunus Emre Center in Astana, Kazakhstan, former president Abdullah Gul (and honorary president of the Yunus Emre Foundation) talked of Turkey's imperative to disseminate its language and culture beyond its borders:

We should not keep our language, culture and traditions to ourselves. Rather, we should keep them alive and spread them.⁸

More or less generous interpretations of this 'cultural' neo-Ottomanism have been made. On more generous readings, 'cultural' neo-Ottomanism has been figured as a relatively benign or indeed desirable development, with Turkey taking its rightful place as the fulcrum of regional cultural, as well as social and political cooperation. For instance, Ömer Taşpınar argues that while Turkish foreign policy is at least in some respects neo-Ottoman it is devoid of imperialist expansionism of the kind practiced by the Ottoman Empire itself; it is simply a tool for asserting Turkey's rightful place as a cultural, political and economic hegemon in the region.⁹ For Taşpınar, neo-Ottomanism is like French Gaullism, in that it seeks Turkish 'grandeur' and influence in foreign policy.¹⁰ Thus, depending on how one views Gaullism, the likening of neo-Ottomanism to Gaullism is either a more or less positive appraisal of the neo-Ottomanism of Turkish foreign policy. A less generous reading might figure this as cultural imperialism, leading to concern that cultural imperialism might, or is indeed intended to, turn into political and economic hegemony. Indeed, as Lerna Yanık

⁶ Quoted in Kaya, Yunus Emre Cultural Centers, p. 57.

⁷ Ibid, p. 58.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Taşpınar, Turkey's Middle East Policies, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 3.

argues, the Empire's supposed and imagined multicultural experience, and its ethnic and linguistic relations with certain states '... were viewed as giving Turkey permission to be involved in their future.'¹¹ For those concerned with Turkey's increasing hegemony in the region, assertions such as those by Davutoğlu that Turkey '... will reintegrate the Balkan region, Middle East and Caucasus ... together with Turkey as the center of world politics in the future'¹² are troublesome. One can observe this in the response of regional states, such as Iran, who are loath to see any such restoration—evidence of which can be seen in the Iranian press with Erdoğan described as the 'Ottoman Don Quixote' in the newspaper *Shahrvand* following his visit to Tehran in April, 2015.¹³

The second image of the Ottoman Empire that underpins discourses and analyses of Turkish foreign policy is the image of the Ottoman Empire as an Islamic Empire. One can point to weaker and stronger versions of the association between neo-Ottomanism and Islamism. In the weak version, Neo-Ottomanism as Islamism is seen as an antidote to excesses of Kemalism, with its militant secularism, nationalism, and Westernization.¹⁴ Neo-Ottomanism thus is seen as a corrective to these excesses, emphasizing and positively valuing Turkey's position between East and West. Thus, Turkey's foreign policy re-orientation away from Europe and toward the Middle East and North Africa is portrayed not as a 'turning away' from the 'West,' but as an appropriate re-balancing of its historical responsibilities and contemporary regional interests. Representative of this discourse is the following statement from Erdoğan:

Turkey is facing the West, but Turkey never turns her back on the East. We cannot be indifferent to countries with whom we have lived for thousands of years. We cannot abandon our brothers to their fate.¹⁵

Rasim Özgür Dönmez considers neo-Ottomanism in foreign policy as being connected to a paternalistic sense of nationhood that seeks to promote Islamic solidarity and thus create an alternative paradigm to the Western-centric world order. Islam and the Islamic world are therefore a key reference point driving a civilizational conception of Turkey's central place in world politics.¹⁶ Hakan Yavuz notes that '... many pundits and critics of Turkey's foreign and domestic politics use this specific term as an epithet to indicate the gradual Islamization of domestic politics and Islamic irredentism in foreign policy.'¹⁷ Stronger associations between neo-Ottomanism and Islamism are generally (though not exclusively) made by critics of AKP's foreign and domestic policies, who argue that neo-Ottomanism is in fact a facade for a more robust Islamism, characterized not by a 're-balancing' but in fact, a turn away from Europe and 'its'

¹¹ Lerna K. Yanık (2016) Bringing the Empire Back In: The Gradual Discovery of the Ottoman Empire in Turkish Foreign Policy, *Die Welt des Islams*, 56(3–4) (p. 488).

¹² Quoted in Svante Cornell (2012) What Drives Turkish Foreign Policy?, *Middle East Quarterly*, 19(1), pp. 13–24 (quote at p. 18).

¹³ *Shahrvand* (2015) *Don kishot-i osmāni dar tehrān* [Ottoman Don Quixote in Tehran], April 7.

¹⁴ Taşpınar, Turkey's Middle East Policies.

¹⁵ Dünya (2012) *Sırtımızı Doğu'ya, Güney'e Dönmeyiz* [Our backs to the East, there's no turning South], April 22.

¹⁶ Rasim Özgür Dönmez (2015) Nationalism in Turkey under Justice and Development Party Rule: The Logic of Masculinist Protection, *Turkish Studies*, 16, pp. 554–571.

¹⁷ M. Hakan Yavuz (2016) Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a Post-National Vision, *Die Welt des Islams*, 56(3–4), p. 440.

values and toward the Middle East and 'its' values.¹⁸ These stronger associations often are grounded in orientalist or quasi-orientalist arguments that assume the existence of two distinct and incompatible sets of values: 'Western' and 'non-Western.' Svante Cornell, for instance, points to the orientalist and Huntingtonian arguments made by the architect of Turkey's foreign policy, the former Foreign and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, as indicative of neo-Ottomanism's Islamist undercurrents.¹⁹ There are, however, also those, such as Soner Çağaptay, who argue that a careful analysis of the AKP's actual foreign policies reveals its Islamist orientation.²⁰ Interestingly, however, since Çağaptay imagines the Ottoman Empire as less of an Islamist and more of a liberal entity, he argues that AKP's foreign policy is not in fact neo-Ottoman, but simply Islamist.²¹ Yavuz, however, argues that neo-Ottomanism is itself a feature of AKP foreign policy, but that at its core, it is 'Islamist, anti-Western, adventurist, and ideological.'²²

The third image of the Ottoman Empire that informs analyses and representations of Turkish foreign (as well as domestic) policy is the image of the Ottoman Empire as a liberal, multicultural empire. Turkey's increasing interest in regional affairs, particularly its recent forays into regional democracy promotion, can be seen as part of an effort to build on such legacy of the Ottoman Empire.²³ The image of a multicultural and liberal empire was also the image utilized by the AKP to promote what it (and many others) saw as a more liberal domestic politics that included what had been called political 'openings,' for instance, the Kurdish, Alevi and democratic 'openings.' When transposed onto Turkey's regional ambitions it was argued that this, along with its economic boom, helped lay the 'geopolitical' foundations for the implementation of neo-Ottomanism in foreign policy.²⁴ For the first two terms in government, the AKP seemed to be trying actively to build on this image of the Ottoman Empire—in both foreign and domestic politics. Toward the end of the second, and into its third terms, with its domestic policies increasingly criticized as anti-democratic and anti-liberal, it seems to have adopted a different Ottoman template with which to work: a subject that is discussed further in the last section of this article when exploring domestic politics.

Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign Policy

As the previous explanation reveals, when used to describe Turkish foreign policy the term neo-Ottomanism is, firstly, open to a broad range of interpretations. This indicates is that it can be applied flexibly to virtually any aspect of Turkish foreign policy,

¹⁸ See: Soner Çağaptay (2009) The AKP's Foreign Policy: The Misnomer of 'Neo-Ottomanism', *The Washington Institute: Policy Analysis*, April 24, 2009. Available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-akps-foreign-policy-the-misnomer-of-neo-ottomanism> , accessed January 25, 2018; and Cornell, *What Drives Turkish Foreign Policy?*

¹⁹ Cornell, *What Drives Turkish Foreign Policy?*, p. 20

²⁰ Çağaptay, *The AKP's Foreign Policy*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Yavuz, *Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism*

²³ Senem Aydin-Düzgüt & E. Fuat Keyman (2014) Democracy Support in Turkey's Foreign Policy, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 25, 2014. Available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/25/democracy-support-in-turkey-s-foreign-policy/h5ne>, accessed February 1, 2018.

²⁴ Arin, *The New Turkey*

which can be construed to have an echo of its Ottoman past. It is a malleable concept, and any number of historical precedents can be used in its application, as can be seen in foreign policy analyses from academics both in Turkey and beyond. Even critics of its usage, such as Soner Çağaptay,²⁵ have attempted to disprove the label by asserting selective historical dissimilarities, such as current Turkish foreign policy not supporting Georgia, or not being even handed toward Israel-Palestine. However, it is just as easy to appropriate historical examples that speak to Ottomanness, such as Akin Unver's description of Erdoğan's attempts to revive 'Pax Ottomana'²⁶—the zenith of Ottoman power, wealth and influence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as the various examples highlighted in the previous section. Danforth also points to the sense that the debate around the AKP's foreign policy becomes too easily read in terms of a perceived false or over-simplified dichotomy of pro-Ottoman Islamists vs. anti-Ottoman secularists.²⁷ He also notes that the term can be manipulated to suit the context in which it is being applied, such as when it is used to describe both Erdoğan's previously good relations with Syria's Bashar al-Assad and his subsequent support for Syrian opposition forces fighting the al-Assad regime.²⁸

It is also worth remembering that neo-Ottomanism as a term is not confined to the AKP period. There is its initial usage by Greece as a neo-imperial stick to beat the Turks with following the invasion of Cyprus in 1974, and some antecedents can be seen in the way Turgut Özal's foreign policy was described in the late 1980s and early 1990s.²⁹ Özal certainly drew on elements of Ottoman identity to challenge state-centric, Turkish notions of identity, and arguably opened a space for debate over Turkish identity and in doing so its implications for foreign policy.³⁰ While there was greater engagement with former Ottoman territories, Özal's foreign policy was about utilizing Turkish culture in a much broader sense, particularly with the emphasis on cultivating relations with the Turkic states of Central Asia. This was demonstrated through the establishment of the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY), which grouped together the Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, along with the Turkic republics of the Russian Federation.

In her instructive overview of neo-Ottomanism in Turkish foreign policy, Lerna Yanik argues that neo-Ottomanism has been a 'cumulative process that has been unfolding mostly since the 1960s,'³¹ not coming into fully fledged usage until after the 1980 coup. This sense of neo-Ottomanism, while not always explicit, was beginning to shape foreign policy in the 1990s and came closest to practice as opposed to the more rhetorical slant of the 1980s neo-Ottoman discourse, with regular references to Turkey's historical and geographical connections to former Ottoman domains.³² Hakan Yavuz also sketches the use of the discourse and argues that neo-Ottomanism as

²⁵ Çağaptay, *The AKP's Foreign Policy*

²⁶ Akin Unver (2014) *Pax Erdoğan: Is this the end of an era?*, *Al Jazeera: Opinion*, October 27. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/10/pax-erdogana-this-end-an-era-2014102751353514897.html>, accessed January 26, 2018.

²⁷ Danforth, *Multi-Purpose Empire*, p. 655

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See for example, M. Hakan Yavuz (1998) *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux: The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism*, *Middle East Critique*, 7(12), pp. 19–41; and Öztürk, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy*

³⁰ Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 24

³¹ Yanik, *Bringing the Empire Back In*, p. 469

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 480–484

articulated by Özal was based more on the liberal, multi-cultural interpretation of Turkey's past and role in the region, in contrast to Erdoğan's more assertive application.³³

If the notions previously outlined were to be used, then the first reading (which utilized to the image of the Ottoman Empire as the 'cradle or apex of civilization') perhaps would provide the best fit, as this provides an all-encompassing idea of 'Ottomanness' and Turkish identity more widely that equates to a utilization of its perceived civilizational weight and grandeur. This also runs close to the breadth of Turkish cultural foreign policy adopted during the Özal era. This is also broadly where Davutoğlu pitched his conception of Turkish foreign policy as both an academic and politician. The choosing of the wider, civilizational conception as an explanandum at first may appear to be a convenient alignment with Davutoğlu/AKP foreign policy, but what it actually reflects is the importance placed on public and cultural diplomacy as will be explained later. Davutoğlu's own academic work outlines the notion of 'strategic depth' as a guiding feature of Turkish foreign policy, arguing that Turkey is central to regional and indeed world politics, and that it should draw on its historical and civilizational standing to enhance its position. Thus, Davutoğlu provides an interesting case of an academic putting his theoretical work into some kind of policy practice. His civilizational reference points, however, also, as mentioned earlier, can invite an interpretation that sees Davutoğlu promoting a neo-Ottomanism that is Islamist in character on the grounds that he has a worldview that sees Islam and other civilizations (namely the West) as ontologically different.³⁴ Scholars of Turkish foreign policy and the literature surrounding its analysis also may note the 2014 set of articles by Behlül Özkan³⁵ on Davutoğlu's worldview, which refute the neo-Ottoman tag and give it the label of a 'pan-Islamist' foreign policy. However, yet another reading of Davutoğlu's foreign policy is that it takes the Ottoman Empire, and perhaps even Turkish culture and identity at its broadest and then selectively utilizes this to Turkey's advantage in its foreign relations.³⁶ Turkish foreign policy arguably has been undergoing something of a 'cultural turn' since Özal, which also corresponds with a reconnecting with its Ottoman past domestically. This is reflected in the move in IR toward constructivist explanations and the increased popularity of soft power as a tool in a country's diplomatic armory.

If Turkish diplomacy were to promote an explicit 'neo-Ottoman' agenda, however that might be defined, it would be tantamount to diplomatic suicide. There is not one

³³ Yavuz, *Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism*.

³⁴ Cornell, *What Drives Turkish Foreign Policy?*, p. 20.

³⁵ See Behlül Özkan (2014) Turkey, Davutoğlu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism, *Survival*, 56(4), pp. 119–140; and Behlül Özkan (2014) Turkey's Imperial Fantasy, *New York Times*, August 28, 2014. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/29/opinion/ahmet-davutoglu-and-turkeys-imperial-fantasy.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, accessed January 10, 2018.

³⁶ There are some similarities with Iran in the way in which Turkey also has appropriated elements of cultural diplomacy in seeking to expand its regional and wider influence. This can be seen in the work of the Iranian 'Islamic Culture and Relations Organization' (with a focus on Muslim states, and particularly countries with large Shi'i populations), as well as its promotion of cultural and historical ties with Central Asia and specifically the Persian-speaking world (namely, Afghanistan and Tajikistan). See further: Edward Wastnidge (2015) The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power—from cultural diplomacy to soft war, *Politics*, 35(3–4), pp. 364–377; Nadia von Maltzahn (2013) *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris); and E. Wastnidge (2014) Pragmatic Politics: Iran-Central Asia relations since 1991, *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 15(4), pp. 119–130.

state in the former Ottoman domains that would wish to see any kind of assertive Turkish influence in the imperial sense. One only has to look at the contrast between the rhetorical bluster that typifies the recent Turkish position over Mosul, and the distinct lack of resolve fully to engage militarily there, to see that there is little desire for a Turkish neo-imperial adventure in former Ottoman domains. Indeed the ‘neo-Ottoman’ label has been used in the regional press and media analysis of Turkish foreign policy as symptomatic of perceived Turkish over ambition,³⁷ and Sotiris Livas has noted the changing perceptions of Turkey in the Arab media, which have expressed an increasing scepticism regarding perceived Turkish neo-imperialism in the Middle East.³⁸ As Yanık has highlighted, Turkish statesmen historically have been wary of using the neo-Ottoman label in foreign policy.³⁹ Even Davutoğlu subsequently has had to go on record several times to correct what he sees as a misnomer. In an interview with *Balkan Insight* in 2011, he explained:

I am not a neo-Ottoman. Actually, there is no such policy. We have a common history and cultural depth with the Balkan countries, which nobody can deny. We cannot act as if the Ottomans never existed in this region. My perception of history in the Balkans is that we have to focus on the positive aspects of our common past.⁴⁰

This seems to substantiate the argument that Davutoğlu was trying to shape Turkish foreign policy by appropriating selectively what he perceives as ‘positive’ aspects of Turkey’s historical and cultural connections with the Balkans. In 2011, Erdoğan had made a similar argument in an article he wrote for *Newsweek*, distancing himself and the foreign policy Turkey pursued under his government from the label “neo-Ottoman”:

Turkey is becoming a global and regional player with its soft power. Turkey is rediscovering its neighborhood, one that had been overlooked for decades. It is following a proactive foreign policy stretching from the Balkans to the Middle East and the Caucasus. Turkey’s ‘zero-problem, limitless trade’ policy with the countries of the wider region aims to create a haven of nondogmatic stability for all of us ... This is not a romantic neo-Ottomanism: It is realpolitik based on a new vision of the global order.⁴¹

The AKP’s foreign policy also has been focused on enhancing Turkey’s position through an attempted use of soft power as expressed by former key AKP figures such

³⁷ Further examples can be seen with the following: Islamic Republic News Agency [*IRNA*] (2015) *Now osmani geri va chāleshhā-i pīshravī-i turkīyeh* [Neo-Ottomanists and Turkey’s developing challenges] February 28. Available at: <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/81522826/>, accessed January 29, 2018; and Catherine Shakdam (2014) Is Turkey attempting to resurrect the Ottoman Empire on the back of the ‘black army’?, *Al Akhbar*, October 29, 2014. Available at: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/22243>, accessed January 29, 2018.

³⁸ Sotiris Livas (2015) Turkey’s image in the Middle East via the Arab media, *Turkish Review*, 5(1), pp. 14–21.

³⁹ Yanık, Bringing the Empire Back In, p. 488.

⁴⁰ *Balkan Insight* (2011) Interview with Davutoğlu: I’m Not a Neo-Ottoman, April 26. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/davutoglu-i-m-not-a-neo-ottoman>, accessed January 29, 2018.

⁴¹ *Newsweek* (2011) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Turkey has Vigor that the EU Needs Badly, January 17.

as Davutoğlu,⁴² and as seen in the above quote by Erdoğan. Soft power often has been used in analyses of Turkish foreign policy and helps shed light on how the concept of a broad neo-Ottoman approach has been applied in Turkey's public and cultural diplomacy. Some scholars emphasize Turkey's democratic credentials as a form of soft power, insofar as Turkey is acting as a 'model' for regional states.⁴³ Other scholars seek to incorporate Turkey's development assistance into their understanding of soft power projection. This is evidenced through activities such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA),⁴⁴ which has relevance for Turkey's ambitions in acting as a benevolent guide to global south countries.

Murat Yeşiltaş and Ali Balcı see Turkey's soft power approach as being based on 'three foundational principles of historical and cultural connection with the region: the democratic tradition democratic institutions and a free market economy.'⁴⁵ This is a close reflection of Davutoğlu's conception of Turkish soft power, one that is articulated through '... a new language in regional and international politics that prioritizes Turkey's civil-economic power.'⁴⁶ Similarly, Bilgehan Öztürk focuses on the 'softer' aspects of its public diplomacy, with Turkey speaking 'softly' on regional issues,⁴⁷ again a point highlighted by Davutoğlu's emphasis on utilizing a new diplomatic language in Turkish foreign policy. This is an interpretation shared by Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz,⁴⁸ who emphasize such elements of Turkey's diplomacy efforts, particularly its attempts to act as mediator in regional and global issues.

Ayhan Kaya, however, offers a slightly more nuanced take, distinguishing between the ways such soft power is viewed.⁴⁹ He highlights the AKP's own view of it as being based on religious affinity, whereas in the West the focus is on Turkey's democratic credentials serving as a model. For Taşpınar on the other hand, it is multifaceted and all-encompassing, amounting to a '... bridge between East and West, a Muslim nation, a secular state, a democratic political system, and a capitalistic economic force.'⁵⁰

Where the above uses of soft power tend to run into problems is when they take it as a given feature of international affairs and public diplomacy. However, three recent scholarly contributions in the form of critical appraisals of soft power perhaps shed most light on Turkey's use of this tool and its relevance for understanding neo-

⁴² Ahmet Davutoğlu (2010) Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy, *Foreign Policy*, May 20. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/>, accessed January 27, 2018.

⁴³ See, for example, Tarik Oğuzlu (2007) Soft Power in Turkish Foreign Policy, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 61(1), pp. 81–97; and Laura Batalla-Adam (2012) Turkey's Foreign Policy in the AKP Era: Has there been an axis shift?, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 11(3), pp. 139–148.

⁴⁴ See Pinar İpek (2015) Ideas and Change in Foreign Policy Instruments: Soft Power and the Case of the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 11(2), pp. 173–193; and Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, Democracy Support in Turkey's Foreign Policy, p. 3

⁴⁵ Murat Yeşiltaş & Ali Balcı (2013) Dictionary of Turkish Foreign Policy in the AK Party Era: A Conceptual Map, *Sam Papers*, 7, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Davutoğlu, Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy

⁴⁷ Öztürk, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy*

⁴⁸ Ziya Öniş & Şuhnaz Yılmaz (2009) Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era, *Turkish Studies*, 10(1), pp. 7–24.

⁴⁹ Kaya, Yunus Emre Cultural Centers, p. 3

⁵⁰ Taşpınar, Turkey's Middle East Policies, p. 3.

Ottomanism within Turkish foreign policy. Lukes,⁵¹ for example, argues that because power is a potentiality rather than an actuality it is difficult to measure and may indeed never be actualized, which can be applied to notions of soft power. Thus, it serves the selective appropriation of Ottoman history and its presentation as soft power. To this end it suits Turkish foreign policy-makers, and advocates of the AKP's approach, in that it appeals to a nostalgic ideal that can be construed as a form of neo-Ottomanism. Miskimmon et al.⁵² emphasize how many studies into soft power fail to fully measure or appreciate its impact. For Miskimmon et al., the idea of 'strategic narrative' (how actors form and project narratives and how third parties interpret and interact with these narratives) is of greater importance in emphasizing the role of power and communication in international relations. This could be applied to Davutoğlu's efforts at projecting a form of soft power that takes a broad, civilizational conception of Turkish (and with it, Ottoman) identity as its starting point, and sees its subsequent channeling through a narrative as articulated by his own strategic depth concept of Turkish foreign policy. Finally, through focusing on the idea of 'representational force,' Mattern⁵³ emphasizes that, in contrast to Nye's⁵⁴ famous formulation of soft power being about 'co-option and attraction' as opposed to 'coercion and payment' a certain degree of coercion *is* in fact inherent in the means utilized to deploy soft power. This is due to the necessity of making oneself (in this case Turkey) attractive to the audience in question. Therefore, soft power may not be as benign as it may appear at first sight, and thus fits with Turkey's strategic priorities in becoming a key player in regional and global politics, utilizing its historical and cultural connections where they serve a purpose.

Thus, what can be observed in Turkish foreign policy during the AKP era is a kind of public and cultural diplomacy push, whereby Davutoğlu has attempted to craft a multi-faceted foreign policy that speaks to regional states on a 'common' level. This use of a neo-Ottoman sentiment has been funneled through Turkey's heritage, religious networks, and shared history as a means of extending its influence.⁵⁵ Danforth sums this up well in noting that: '... for increasingly dynamic Turkish businesses looking to sell biscuits or build houses in nearby states, from Macedonia to Iraq, it helped to be able to talk about a shared history defined by cooperation rather than conflict.'⁵⁶ This demonstrates how the selective appropriation of history seen in the AKP's foreign relations is at a broad level. Therefore, common Ottoman heritage is used as a legitimating tool be the AKP in its efforts to re-establish Turkey's leadership role in the region where it geographically and spiritually belongs.⁵⁷ Hence it is about presenting Turkey as a cooperative and significant regional player and utilizing those historical and cultural signifiers that are found in its Ottoman past to affect its present.

⁵¹ Steven Lukes (2007) Power and the Battle for Hearts and Minds: On the Bluntness of Soft Power, in: Felix Berenskoetter & Michael J. Williams (eds) *Power in World Politics* (London: Routledge), pp. 83–97 (at p. 87).

⁵² Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin & Laura Roselle (2013) *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge).

⁵³ Janice Bially Mattern (2007) Why Soft Power Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics, *Millennium*, 33(3) pp. 583–612.

⁵⁴ Joseph S. Nye (2004) *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs).

⁵⁵ Yavuz, Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism, p. 460.

⁵⁶ Danforth, The Empire Strikes Back.

⁵⁷ Gabriela Özel Volfová (2016) Turkey's Middle Eastern Endeavors: Discourses and Practices of Neo-Ottomanism under the AKP, *Die Welt des Islams*, 56(3–4), p. 492.

Neo-Ottomanism in Domestic Politics

Sustained reflections on the presence of neo-Ottomanist discourses in domestic politics are missing from the literature on neo-Ottomanism, due largely to its foreign policy focus. In some ways, domestic discourses on neo-Ottomanism are similar to the previously discussed foreign policy discourses. Like in foreign policy, the domestic discourses are grounded in the desire for a ‘great restoration’ of lost, ‘ancient values,’⁵⁸ although precisely what those ‘values’ are remains contested, as different groups imagine vastly different Ottoman Empires. Thus, for some critics (and champions) of the AKP, its policies are a return to the Islamism of the Ottoman Empire, while for others, they are indicative of an embrace of the liberal and multicultural legacy of the Empire.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Nicholas Danforth, sees the appetite for all things Ottoman within Turkey as variously ‘... a new act of religious, transnational or national appropriation, or in many cases a blend of all three.’⁶⁰

To some extent, therefore, there are similarities in foreign and domestic usages of the concept of neo-Ottomanism. As Özel Volfová has highlighted in her examination of neo-Ottoman discourses under the AKP, ‘The sense of pride emerging from Turkey’s Ottoman past and focusing on Turkey’s Ottoman identity in public discourse corresponds with the AKP’s political, economic and cultural practices at home, as well as abroad.’⁶¹ However, there are also some significant differences. First, while in foreign policy the AKP government has been weary of the neo-Ottoman label, it seems to have embraced it in domestic discourses. Since coming to power, but especially in its second and third terms in government, the AKP increasingly has appropriated a neo-Ottomanism as a rhetorical and legitimating framework for its domestic policies.

As with foreign policy, there is precedent in terms of neo-Ottoman-like practices prior to the AKP coming to power. Esra Özyürek notes the popular appropriation of religious symbols, among the Turkish Islamist constituency starting in the 1990s, in a foregrounding of the attempted Islamization and anti-Kemalist drive that was to come,⁶² and that this competition has ‘... significant consequences in changing the way citizens conceptualize the state and their relationship to it.’⁶³ Like Kemalists, Islamist political activists harnessed a memory-based politics but instead yearned for the Ottoman past with its attendant focus on Islam, and thus Ottomanism became popular among the rising Islamist elites during the 1990s.⁶⁴ In a similar vein, Alev

⁵⁸ Kiper, Sultan Erdogan.

⁵⁹ There are also some AKP champions who argue that the Islamic nature of the Ottoman Empire was what made it a multicultural one. In other words, Islam, as it is a religion that respects all religions and cultures, was the guarantor of rights of other religions and cultures. See, for example: Nazif Gündoğan (2015) Osmanlı’yı özleyen Ortadoğu [A Middle East missing the Ottomans], *Yeni Şafak*, October 20; Yusuf Kaplan (2015) Osmanlı yaşasaydı, dünya kıyıya vurmazdı [If the Ottomans were here, the world would not have sunk into chaos], *Yeni Şafak*, September 6, 2015; Yusuf Kaplan (2014) Osmanlı, neden insanlığın geleceğidir? [Why the Ottoman’s are the future of humanity], *Yeni Şafak*, August 31; Yavuz Bahadıroğlu (2015), Nezakat Medeniyetinden Kabalık Uygarlığına [From culture of refinement to civilisation of ignorance], *Yeni Akit*, October 16, 2015; and Seyfullah Arpacı (2006) Osmanlı Hoşgörüsünün Adı: Millet Sistemi [Ottoman tolerance in name: The Millet System], *Sızıntı*, September 12.

⁶⁰ Danforth, Multi-Purpose Empire, p. 673.

⁶¹ Özel Volfová, Turkey’s Middle Eastern Endeavors, p. 497.

⁶² Özyürek, Miniaturizing Atatürk, p. 378.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey*, p. 156.

Çınar outlines the Refah Party's use of Ottoman symbolism in the 1990s, when party leaders presented Ottoman-Islamic civilization as Turkey's 'true national culture' and national identity.⁶⁵ This view found an articulation via city administrations' promotional activities that sought to present Istanbul as an Ottoman-Islamic city,⁶⁶ and Refah mayors' introduced state objects inflected with Ottoman-Islamic references.⁶⁷

The AKP has been active in embracing and promoting a specific understanding of neo-Ottomanism in domestic politics. It has done so in three interrelated ways: (1) by attempting to establish a direct lineage between particular members of the house of Osman (especially Sultan Abdülhamid II) and high-ranking members of the AKP (especially, though not exclusively, the former Prime Minister and current President Erdoğan); (2) by, in turn, arguing that the historical enemies of the Ottoman Empire (and especially Abdülhamid II) still are working to undermine the power of Turkey and its leadership; and (3) by claiming that AKP policies and programs are a continuation or expansion of the policies and programs of the Ottoman Empire (especially the late Ottoman Empire). Although in reality, these three discourses are intimately related and intertwined, an analytical distinction has been drawn here for heuristic purposes. Where they differ from the previously mentioned attempts to bring in Ottoman reference points during the 1990s, as highlighted by Özyürek, Çınar, and Navarro-Yashin, is that their appropriation comes not as a counter identity to Kemalism but as a form of hegemonic identity, reflecting the power of the AKP in contemporary Turkish politics. The AKP's harnessing of Ottoman identity is highly selective, and so rather than drawing on the multicultural Ottoman project of the nineteenth century and of the Young Turks in response to the creeping authoritarianism of Abdülhamid,⁶⁸ it can be viewed as a repurposing of the authoritarian, Islamist tendencies of that ruler. In contrasting the Ottomanism of Özal and Erdoğan, Hakan Yavuz distinguishes between Özal's pluralist approach which recognized the rise and power of Turkey's varied communities, whereas Erdoğan's approach is more about 'state power and the concentration of power in the hands of a single individual.'⁶⁹

AKP and pro-AKP discourses of neo-Ottomanism are revealing of an attempt to establish a direct lineage between key figures, and supporters of the AKP government and the Ottomans. Complementing generic attempts to establish and capitalize on this lineage—such as Erdoğan's statement 'We are the grandchildren of Ottomans!'⁷⁰—are more specific attempts to link leading figures in the AKP government, as well as key government policies, to those of the late Ottoman Empire. The AKP's Press Secretary, for instance, has stated that, 'Erdoğan has realized [Sultan] Abdülhamid's dream of building a road between the northernmost and southernmost cities in Turkey,'⁷¹ while Erdoğan himself has argued that the Marmaray (an underground train connecting the European and Asian parts of Istanbul) is the realization of Sultan Abdülmecid's

⁶⁵ Çınar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey*.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 162.

⁶⁷ Navarro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism And Public Life In Turkey*, p. 200

⁶⁸ Özel Volfová, Turkey's Middle Eastern Endeavors, pp. 490–491.

⁶⁹ Yavuz, Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism, p. 456.

⁷⁰ YouTube (2009) Başbakan Erdoğan: Osmanlı Torunlarıyız! [Prime Minister Erdoğan: We are the Grandchildren of the Ottomans], January 6. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W10Q1AUDTfw>, accessed December 28, 2017.

⁷¹ *Star* (2014) Abdülhamit'in rüyasını Erdoğan gerçekleştirdi [Erdoğan has realised Sultan Abdülhamid's dream], July 18.

dream.⁷² Others have argued that, like Abdülhamid, who never borrowed money from foreign powers, Erdoğan has eliminated Turkey's debt to the IMF.⁷³ In a video accompanying Davutoğlu's accession to the Turkish prime ministership, the accompanying soundtrack lauds him as 'the awaited spirit of Abdülhamid.'⁷⁴ AKP candidates for the general election held in June 2015 appeared on election posters in traditional Ottoman dress, while Erdoğan has welcomed Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to Turkey flanked by costumed warrior representing various 'Turkic' empires, from the Huns of 200 BC to the Seljuk, Mughal and Ottoman empires.

The AKP and its supporters seem particularly keen on creating a discursive link between Erdoğan and the late Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid. This discursive link also has extended to the argument that the historical enemies of the Ottoman Empire, and especially those of Abdülhamid, are still at work trying to destabilize modern Turkey, and particularly, the AKP government. Showing images of Abdülhamid and Erdoğan, AKP Assembly Member Metin Kulunk made the following statement: 'This nation will not let you swallow its leaders. You are talking at Raki [a Turkish alcoholic drink] tables how Erdoğan will be gotten rid of, but you are mistaken.'⁷⁵ Others have compared the March 31, 1909 rebellion, which dethroned Abdülhamid, to the 2013 Gezi Park protests, arguing that foreign powers and interests were behind both, trying to discredit and destabilise the AKP government as they did Abdülhamid.⁷⁶ Ergun Diler, Editor in Chief of the newspaper *Takvim* (a mouthpiece of the AKP government), has painted Erdoğan as the avenger of Abdülhamid.⁷⁷ For others, such as *Daily Sabah* columnist Burhanettin Duran, writing after the 2016 coup attempt, a similarity lies in their respective consolidations of power in times of political change.⁷⁸ A brief look at the social media accounts of AKP ministers and supporters reveals a similar sentiment: that Abdülhamid had been 'wasted' and will be avenged by Erdoğan.

In the wake of the Gezi Park protests and the late 2013–early 2014 corruption scandals in which high ranking AKP officials and Erdoğan's family were implicated, accusations of foreign attempts 'once again' to destabilize Turkey (as they did with the Ottoman Empire) were made on an almost daily basis. A 'foreign interest lobby' was accused of trying to destabilize the Turkish economy, and shortly after the Gezi Park protests, Erdoğan organized a number of 'respect for national sovereignty' rallies

⁷² *Oda TV* (2013) İşte Marmaray'ın gerçek sahibi [The real owner of the Marmaray], October 30. Available at: <http://www.odatv.com/n.php?n=iste-marmarayin-gercek-sahibi-3010131200>, accessed December 28, 2017.

⁷³ *Yeni Akit* (2014) Abdülhamid'e yapılanlar Erdoğan'a da yapılıyor [What was done to Abdülhamid is now being done to Erdoğan], January 9.

⁷⁴ YouTube (2014) Başbakan Ahmet Davutoğlu'na Bestelenen Şarkı [Song Composed for Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu], August 26. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KuYUbASQEA>, accessed December 28, 2017.

⁷⁵ *Ohaber* (2014) AKP'li vekil Erdoğan'ı Abdülhamid'e benzetti [AKP minister compares Erdoğan to Abdülhamid], February. Available at: <http://www.ohaber.com/akp-li-vekil-erdogan-i-abdulhamid-e-benzetti-h-413140.html>, accessed December 29, 2017.

⁷⁶ *Yeni Akit* (2014) Abdülhamid'e yapılanlar Erdoğan'a da yapılıyor [What was done to Abdülhamid is now being done to Erdoğan], January 9.

⁷⁷ *Ulke Haber* (2014) Diler: Abdülhamit'in intikamını Erdoğan alacak [Diler: Erdoğan will avenge Abdülhamid], August 29. Available at: <http://www.ulkehaber.com/medya/diler-abdulhamitin-intikamini-erdogan-alacak-55163.html>, accessed December 28, 2017.

⁷⁸ Burhanettin Duran (2016) Comparing Erdoğan with Mustafa Kemal and Sultan Abdülhamid, *Daily Sabah*, October 7. Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/duran-burhanettin/2016/10/07/comparing-erdogan-with-mustafa-kemal-and-sultan-abdulhamid>, accessed January 16, 2018.

during which he accused Gezi Park protestors of serving as puppets of foreign powers bent on undermining the strength of the Turkish nation.⁷⁹ In an attempt to link his resistance to the demands of Gezi Park protestors to the resistance of the late Ottoman Empire to foreign intervention and domination, Erdoğan urged those supporting or attending the rallies to show their support by displaying Ottoman (as opposed to Turkish republican) flags.⁸⁰ More recently, Erdoğan claimed that the ‘foreign powers’ he has accused of interfering in Ottoman affairs and thereby causing its demise were supporting the HDP (People’s Democratic Platform, progressive leftist political party with a dominant but not exclusive Kurdish base with human rights, democratization, and justice as its main focus). When HDP passed the 10 percent threshold required to get assembly seats, pro-AKP papers and other media outlets interpreted this as an achievement of the said ‘foreign powers’ rather than that of HDP.⁸¹

It would be useful to reflect on the AKP historical references at this point. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was stagnating. Believing that modernization and reform would strengthen the Empire’s international standing and win back the loyalty of those increasingly disinterested in its survival, the Young Turks, a group of Western-educated intellectuals and soldiers, demanded a constitutional monarchy from Sultan Abdulaziz (reign: 1861–1876). Following his rejection of such demand, Abdulaziz was dethroned and replaced with his brother, Murat V, who reigned for 90 days, before himself being dethroned by Adbülhamid II (reigned 1876–1909), who established a constitution and assembly in 1876. However, using the war with the Russian Empire as an excuse, Adbülhamid II suspended them two years later, and from 1878 onward presided over an authoritarian regime in which he penalized all criticism of the Sultan and his government, established a notorious secret service, and promoted Sunni Muslim values above others; in addition, the first massacres of Armenians took place in this period (the 1890s).

These developments were important factors behind the emergence of two groups with similar ideas: intellectuals who fled to France following the suspension of the assembly and constitution, and who were there called the ‘Young Turks’; and soldiers, predominantly based in Saloniki, called the CUP (Committee of Union and Progress). In 1908 the army, led by the CUP, engaged in what has been called the Young Turk Revolution, known at time as the ‘Revolution for Freedom.’ To appease the revolutionaries and avoid possible removal from the throne and even execution Adbulhamid declared a second constitutional era. On March 31, 1909 a group of religious fundamentalists attempted a counterrevolution, in which Adbulhamid denied involvement, calling it an English plot to destabilize the Empire. The CUP army crushed the revolution, executing everyone involved and exiling Abdülhamid to Saloniki. Though Mehmed V became Abdülhamid’s successor, the CUP ruled from behind the scenes. Abdülhamid eventually was brought back to the Yıldız Palace (due to the loss of Saloniki in the Balkan Wars), where he died in 1918. The CUP army that dethroned Abdülhamid included the future leader of the Turkish Republic, Kemal Atatürk. The

⁷⁹ NTV (2013) Erdoğan: Faiz lobisinin neferi oldular [Erdoğan: The interest lobby have become incensed], June 23. Available at: <http://www.ntv.com.tr/arsiv/id/25450624>, accessed December 27, 2017.

⁸⁰ *Hürriyet* (2013) Başbakan Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Osmanlı bayrağı da açabilirsiniz [Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: We can fly the Ottoman flag too], June 13.

⁸¹ *Milliyet* (2015) HDP nin kampanyasını üst akıl yönetiyor [Masterminds behind the HDP campaign], October 29.

argument of those who would establish a direct lineage between the AKP and Abdülhamid is that Erdoğan, like Abdülhamid, has similar enemies trying to ‘dethrone’ him: secular, republican elites and foreign powers. AKP supporters, in turn, argue that they will avenge Abdülhamid, who, like Erdoğan, was a supporter of the ‘people’ against the army and the elites who destroyed him. In 2016, Erdoğan himself accused thousands of academics and artists who signed a petition calling for an end to state violence in the Kurdish southeast of being ‘lumpen elites who no longer are able to rule Turkey as they did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.’⁸²

This attempt to create a direct lineage and to ‘avenge Ottoman history’ is not just discursive or a rhetorical revisionism of history, whereby an attempt is made to bypass or minimize what has been painted as the ‘republican period’ (1923–2003) of Turkish history.⁸³ Rather, attempts to create such lineage have non-discursive, material counterparts. Most recently, Ottoman language courses have been made a requirement from primary school onward;⁸⁴ the number of *Imam Hatip* schools⁸⁵ has increased at the expense of public schools, with many public schools being turned into *Imam Hatip* schools;⁸⁶ neo-Ottoman architecture has been promoted at the expense of ‘republican’ or modern architecture—with proposals to replace the Prime Minister’s residence in Çankaya, an example of early modern architecture, with ‘a building representative of Turkish architectural style’ (i.e., ‘neo-Ottoman-ish’),⁸⁷ to raze Gezi Park in order to build a shopping center and condominiums in faux-Ottoman style,⁸⁸ and to replace the Atatürk Cultural Centre with a ‘Baroque’ style opera house.⁸⁹ For Yavuz these can be viewed, at the most critical interpretation, as ‘inauthentic, imaginary fabrications of the past that manipulate, distort, or downright ignore historical evidence.’⁹⁰

Interestingly, however, the figure of Abdülhamid also can be repurposed to offer a powerful critique of the AKP government. There exists another, more sinister legacy of Abdülhamid: the long legacy of authoritarianism that followed the brief democratic opening of 1876–1878. According to this alternative lineage, Erdoğan could be seen not as a reincarnation of the populist Abdülhamid, fighting on behalf of the people against an authoritarian, foreign-backed elite, but as a corrupt, authoritarian ruler. As previously mentioned, Abdülhamid criminalized all dissent and established the Ottoman Secret Service, an organization responsible for the arrest and disappearance thousands of critics and political opponents of the Sultan. During his decade in power, criticism of Erdoğan likewise has become increasingly criminalized, with thousands

⁸² *ZETE Haber* (2016) Erdoğan akademisyenlere lümpen, Kılıçdaroğlu’na pişkin dedi [Academics lumpen, Kılıçdaroğlu unaware claims Erdoğan], January 20.

⁸³ Only two moments stand out, according to this discourse, as ‘non-republican’: the rule of Menderes (who positioned himself against the ruling CHP; was the winner of first multi-party elections; and was charged with treason and executed); and Özal (who was seen as blending neo-liberalism with Islam).

⁸⁴ *Hürriyet* (2014) Osmanlıca zorunlu ders oluyor [Compulsory Ottoman classes to be brought in], December 5.

⁸⁵ Government-funded religious schools

⁸⁶ *69Cumhuriyet* (2014) Okullara İmam Hatip sınıfları geliyor [Imam Hatip classes to come to schools], August 30.

⁸⁷ *Sol* (2012) Yine bir ‘Osmanlı-Türk mimarisi’ hamlesi: Başbakanlık resmi konutu yıkılıyor [Latest move toward ‘Ottoman-Turkish’ architecture: Prime Ministry knocks down official residency], July 30.

⁸⁸ *Hürriyet* (2013) Gezi parkı’ndaki kavganın sebebi AVM planı [Shopping mall plan cause behind Gezi park row], May 31.

⁸⁹ *Vatan* (2013) AKM yerine ‘Barok’ bir opera binası [‘Baroque’ style opera building instead of shopping mall plan], June 8.

⁹⁰ Yavuz, *Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism*, p. 447.

arrested and hundreds serving lengthy prison sentences for what would be considered the cornerstones of liberal democracy—freedom of speech, dissent and assembly.⁹¹ State officers, police officers, members of the army, and bureaucrats who have opposed Erdoğan, more often than not, have found themselves either out of a job, imprisoned, or reassigned. This situation was compounded further in the post-2016 coup attempt purge of suspected Gülenists, and the imprisonment of prominent journalists, notably from the staunchly republican daily *Cumhuriyet*, whose critical editorial policy was seen as evidence of its collaboration with those supporting the attempted coup.⁹² This fits into what Rasim Özgür Dönmez⁹³ describes as a paternalistic narrative of ‘masculinist protection’ to exclude opposition from the public sphere. In a drive to cleanse Turkish political and civic offices of those with alleged links to the Gülen movement—which Erdoğan named as the key sponsor of the coup attempt—the Turkish state arrested some 47,000 people.

Erdoğan’s election to the post of president, and subsequent victory in the 2017 referendum on creating an executive presidential system in Turkey, has raised suspicions that he is consolidating power, in the style of Putin and Medvedev in Russia. Those suspicions were built up prior to the constitutional amendment by Erdoğan’s reinterpretation of the presidential role to include direct involvement in the governing of the country, in opposition to the largely ceremonial role normally had by the president. On many occasions, Erdoğan insisted that his preferred presidential system would be based on a genuinely Turkish model and not resemble the American presidency as the latter had too many institutions, such as the Senate, curtailing the powers of the President and limiting his/her ability to take necessary action (such as, Erdoğan once said, ‘taking down an enemy helicopter’).⁹⁴ Translating his words into action, since his ascent to the presidency, Erdoğan presided over cabinet meetings, remained intimately involved in legislation, and attended NATO meetings—traditional purviews of the Prime Minister in Turkish politics. Davutoğlu, appointed to the post of Prime Minister following Erdoğan’s presidential election, was widely perceived as Erdoğan’s puppet, or placeholder at best, until he fell out of favor.

In addition to trying to build on and avenge the legacy of Abdülhamid, the AKP also has portrayed itself as the party that has revived the liberal and multicultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire. However, as was the case with Abdülhamid, the Ottoman Empire’s record with regard to its minority citizens also can be repurposed to offer a critique of the AKP government’s ostensible liberalism and multiculturalism. Though the Ottoman Empire certainly recognized the presence of various groups within the imperial polity, the existence of non-Sunnis was merely ‘tolerated’—as opposed to non-Sunnis being seen as equal citizens, or subjects, of the Empire. From its foundations to the early nineteenth century, the empire was built on a hierarchy among these various groups, which translated to different rights and duties as subjects—Christians paid more taxes than Muslims, were not allowed to bear arms, the testimony of

⁹¹ Agnes Czajka (2012) The Love Affair with Erdoğan, *Jadaliyya*, August 27. Available at: [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7074/the-love-affair-with-erdogan-\(part-1\)](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7074/the-love-affair-with-erdogan-(part-1)), accessed January 25, 2018.

⁹² Ali Bayramoglu (2017) How Journalism Became a Crime in Turkey, *Al Monitor – Turkey Pulse*, April 24. Available at: <http://al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/turkey-journalism-itself-becomes-crime.html>, accessed January 17, 2018.

⁹³ Dönmez, *Nationalism in Turkey*, p. 565.

⁹⁴ *A Haber* (2015) Belediye Başkanlığımdan beri istiyorum [I’ve wanted this since I was Mayor], January 27.

Muslims was considered superior to the testimony of Christians, and so on. In the early part of the nineteenth century, legal reforms were undertaken to create a universal Ottoman citizenship (the original Ottomanism that should not be confused with neo-Ottomanism). For a number of reasons—including the solidified belief that Muslims were inherently superior to others, and emerging nationalisms (including Turkish) within the Empire—these legal measures were not effective. So, with the exception of the 50 or so years of the Tanzimat period, the history of the Ottoman Empire is one in which no real equality existed.

Although the AKP began its term in government with the promise of democratization and recognition of the equal status of religious and ethnic minorities in Turkey, inequality persists between various groups, with the cultural rights of ‘ethnic Turks’ and Sunni Muslims increasingly taking precedence over the rights of other ethnic and religious groups. Among the more telling statements by Erdoğan was his suggestion that Alevi should start praying in mosques instead of Cem houses,⁹⁵ and his disdain at being called an Armenian—as if it was an insult.⁹⁶ As previously noted, this is not simply populist rhetoric—it has material, policy implications. For example: the rights of Kurdish and Armenian groups continue to be repressed, and non-Muslims do not have the same political (or cultural) rights as Sunni-Turks. Non-Muslim schools continue to require an ethnic Turkish principle; renovation work of non-Muslim foundation properties cannot be undertaken without permission of the ministry of Awqaf; the Orthodox Christian Heybeliada Halki seminary remains closed; Kurds still only can learn Kurdish in private schools; and though some previously confiscated property has been returned to its non-Muslim owners (following rulings by the European Court of Human Rights), not all property has been returned. Thus, despite AKP attempts to value positively a particular kind of neo-Ottomanism, what emerges is a continuation of authoritarianism and a lack of liberal, multicultural and democratic principles that characterized the Ottoman Empire for much of its history.

Conclusion

Neo-Ottomanism is a concept that just as easily can be used as a stick with which to beat the AKP as it can be used as a badge of diplomatic agility to hang around its neck. Under the AKP government, Turkey has sought to use elements of public and cultural diplomacy and development assistance to enhance its regional standing. This has included applying a selective appropriation of Ottoman grandeur where appropriate, although one that often is couched in diplomatic niceties and recognition of the need for tactfully managing regional relations. In the international sphere, recent events, such as the rise and fall of the so-called Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria, have tested and indeed challenged Turkey’s ambitions, and they will be viewed in the future as a critical juncture for Turkey’s standing in the region. Having seen its regional ambitions take a battering in light of the conflicts on its southern borders,

⁹⁵ *Radikal* (2013) Erdoğan: Alevilik din değil; Ali ile alakaları yok [Erdoğan: Alevism is not a religion, it has nothing to do with Ali], February 22.

⁹⁶ *Başka Haber* (2014) Erdoğan: ‘Benim İçin Gürcü Dediler. Afedersin Daha Çirkinini Söylediler, Ermeni Dediler’ [Erdoğan: ‘They called me Georgian. In fact, worse—they called me Armenian’], August 6. Available at: <http://www.baskahaber.org/2014/08/erdogan-benim-icin-gurcu-dediler-html>, accessed December 28, 2017.

Turkey found itself the center of geopolitical intrigue with its handling of the Jamal Khashoggi affair, following the murder of the Saudi journalist and government critic in Istanbul by Saudi operatives in October 2018. The crisis afforded Erdoğan the opportunity to present Turkey as a major regional player as he revealed details of the operation with the world's media watching.

Although the concept of neo-Ottomanism has been deployed primarily in representations and analyses of foreign policy, it can make a significant contribution to understanding Turkish domestic politics. The discourse of neo-Ottomanism has become increasingly prominent in Turkish domestic politics and has significant material and policy implications. What is more, though in a manner certainly unintended by the AKP, its desire to draw on Turkey's Ottoman past in domestic politics can shed light on the creeping authoritarianism that can be observed during the AKP's second and third terms in government, and in its response to the coup attempt and subsequent constitutional amendments. The 2016 coup afforded Erdoğan the opportunity to institute a widescale purge of his opponents and the censoring of the press.⁹⁷ In doing so he cited a hostile deep state and foreign powers as being responsible, echoing the narrative of Turkey being besieged internally and externally, as it was during Abdülhamid's reign. It should be noted, of course, that foreign and domestic articulations and explanations of neo-Ottomanism do not exist in a vacuum or are in some way hermetically sealed from one another. The AKP's selective utilization of a clearly defined, Ottoman history serves its domestic constituency well, and has been sharpened through its usage in foreign policy thinking. However, its interests at the international level require it to temper this logic, so references to Turkey's Ottoman past remain pitched at the broadest level in order to remain palatable diplomatically. Domestically, however, following three successful terms in government, weathering the attempted coup and establishing a presidential system, and still remaining as the largest party in Turkish politics, the material consequences of the AKP's version of neo-Ottomanism remain as bold as ever.

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⁹⁷ For an overview of developments in Turkish media since 2011, including its Islamist/pro-AKP press, and the media landscape in the build-up and response to the coup attempt in 2016, see the 2018 special edition of *Middle East Critique* on media in Turkey. Roxane Farmanfarmanian (ed.) (2018) Media in Turkey Special Edition, *Middle East Critique*, 27(2), pp. 99–219.

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